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STATE OFFERS TIPS TO HELP OFFSET HIGH HEATING COSTS

SACRAMENTO - Heating bills may hit alarming highs this winter, forcing the most vulnerable Californians to make difficult decisions to meet their home heating needs, according to Wendy Wohl, acting director of the California Department of Community Services and Development (CSD). The U.S. Department of Energy predicts that household energy costs this winter will be 41 percent higher for natural gas, 27 percent for heating oil and 21 percent for propane. California utilities also predict increases of 20 to 55 percent for natural gas and propane.

"We're already witnessing situations where families are turning their heat off or down so low that their health is being compromised. The elderly, young children and the disabled are particularly vulnerable to hypothermia," said Wohl. "Some families are also heating their households in a way that increases the risk of fire or carbon monoxide poisoning."

The California Public Utility Commission (CPUC) and local utilities offer programs to mitigate the impact of high heating costs, including modifying credit action policies and utility assistance programs. Pacific Gas and Electric, Southern California Gas and San Diego Gas and Electric help low-income households manage utility costs with programs that level out payments throughout the year to avoid the impact of spikes during the winter and assist households with members who have medical needs. But Wohl said that the single most effective way for households to reduce the costs of heating is by simple energy conservation.

"The best tip is: there's no charge for energy you don't use," said Wohl. "Energy conservation alone can save as much as 20 percent on heating bills so we're educating families and caregivers about no-cost and low-cost ways to save energy this winter while staying healthy and safe."

Wohl offered the following tips to safely reduce heating costs this winter:

No-Cost Energy Saving Tips:

- Turn down the thermostat to 68 degrees or lower during the day and to 55 degrees or off at night or when away from home.
- Wear layers of loose-fitting clothes to trap body heat, such as thermal underwear, sweaters, sweatshirts, sweatpants and socks.
- Turn down the water heater to 120 degrees and fix leaks, especially hot water.
- Open drapes to let the sun heat your home during the day and close them at night to help insulate.

- Close off unused rooms and the vents that heat those rooms.
- Keep warm-air registers, baseboard heaters and radiators clean and ensure they aren't blocked by furniture, carpeting or drapes.
- Move furniture around so you are sitting near interior walls instead of exterior walls and windows.
- Close your fireplace damper tightly when not in use.

Low-Cost Energy Saving Tips:

- Clean or replace furnace filters once a month.
- Install weather-stripping or caulk to leaky doors and windows.
- Install gaskets behind outlet covers.
- Add plastic sheeting to your windows or purchase plastic window covering kits or interior storm window kits.
- Install a programmable thermostat.
- Wrap your hot water tank with jacket insulation. Be sure to leave the air intake vent uncovered when insulating a gas water heater.
- Insulate the water pipes leading from your hot water heater.

Health and Safety Tips:

- Install smoke and carbon monoxide alarms in your home.
- Provide proper venting systems for all heating equipment.
- Never use your range or oven to heat your home or use a BBQ in your home or garage.
- Place space heaters on level, hard and nonflammable surfaces, not on carpets or rugs.
- Keep space heaters at least three feet from bedding, drapes, furniture and other flammable materials.
- Never leave a space heater on when you go to sleep or leave the area.
- Watch children and pets closely in rooms with heating equipment.
- Always use generators outdoors and away from doors, windows and vents.

CSD partners with a network of more than 100 local community service providers who directly administer federal grant programs, including the Low-Income Home Energy Assistance Program (LIHEAP), to low-income families. In 2005, CSD distributed over \$91 million in LIHEAP funding to more than 230,000 eligible households, in weatherization assistance, including attic insulation, weather-stripping, and minor housing repairs, as well as emergency assistance and financial assistance to offset the costs of rising home energy costs.

The U.S. Department of Health and Human Services recently released \$100 million in emergency contingency funds to assist states, tribes, and territories with energy relief programs for 2006, including \$4.4 million to California. Total LIHEAP funding for California is expected to be about \$93 million in 2006. For more information, log on to www.csd.ca.gov.

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